

# MESSAGES RELATED TO CHILDREN

Risk communication message maps for use during/after a critical event or disaster

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## Behavioral Health Guidelines for Risk Communication

BE FIRST. BE RIGHT. BE CREDIBLE.  
BE EMPATHETIC.

Building trust and conveying messages of hope and recovery is critical to the emotional well-being of persons affected by the disaster and the general public. The public's emotional well-being is affected by the messages you deliver.

### **Your messages should:**

- Begin with a statement of empathy.
- Provide reassurance through fact-based information.
- Counter rumors.
- Encourage safe, adaptive and cooperative behavior.
- Promote self-care strategies for stress management.
- Emphasize resilience.

### ***During a period of uncertainty and unconfirmed threat, communication should:***

- Reassure
- Foster Confidence & Coping
- Promote Preparedness

### ***During an event communication should:***

- Reassure
- Foster Confidence & Coping
- Empower
- Encourage People to Reconnect

### ***During recovery communication should:***

- Foster Resilience
- Empower
- Encourage Community Cohesion
- Commemorate

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### Reference:

Missouri Department of Mental Health Office of Disaster Readiness. (2006) *Disaster Communications Guidebook - Communicating in a crisis: Promoting trust, cooperation, & emotional well-being through risk communication*. U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services. (2005). *Terrorism and other public health emergencies: A reference guide for media*. Office of the assistant secretary for public affairs: Washington, D.C. Retrieved April 23, 2007 from <http://www.hhs.gov/emergency>

DeWolfe, D. J., & Nordboe, D. (2000). *SAMHSA field manual for mental health and human services workers in major disasters*. Retrieved March 7, 2007, from <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/ADM90-537/fmrisk.asp>

## Evacuation

### Key message 1

[event] has prompted an evacuation of the school.

#### Supporting Points

1. Safety of our students is our top priority.
2. The staff and students plan and train for [type of event].
3. We are following our evacuation plan.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Tweet or Text</u></p> <p>[Name] School [evacuated/evacuating] due to [event]. Safety is our top priority. More info coming.</p>
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### Key message 2

Your child is safe.

#### Supporting Points

1. Students [are being/ have been] relocated to an evacuation site.
2. We will remain at the evacuation location until the danger passes.
3. We are working hard to keep everyone safe.

### Key message 3

Be prepared to follow official instructions.

#### Supporting Points

1. Stay where you are right now.
2. Once the [event] has been assessed, the school will notify you of next steps.
3. Your patience and cooperation are essential.

## Lockdown: Immediate message

### Key message 1

There is an incident at [Name] school [if possible state what it was]

#### Supporting Points

1. The school is in lockdown and following protocol.
2. No one is allowed in or out of the building.
3. Law enforcement is on scene.

Tweet or Text  
[Name] school is in lockdown. Student safety is our top priority. Stay away until it is resolved. More information to come.

### Key message 2

Staff and students have trained for these situations.

#### Supporting Points

1. Students and staff are required to turn off their phones.
2. Do not try to contact students or staff; it can place them in danger.
3. Contact will be allowed when it is safe.

### Key message 3

Student safety is the top priority.

#### Supporting Points

1. Stay where you are so responders can resolve the situation.
2. Follow all [official / law enforcement] instructions.
3. School officials will provide more information, including how to reunite with your child.

## Lockout

### Key message 1

The school is in lockout due to [name event outside school].

#### Supporting Points

1. Students are safe inside the school.
2. All doors are locked.
3. No one goes in or out of the building.

Tweet or Text  
[Name] school is in lockout  
due to [event outside school].  
Students are safe. More  
information to come.

### Key message 2

Inside the school it is business as usual.

#### Supporting Points

1. Classes continue to be taught.
2. Students are following their normal routine.
3. The school will continue to monitor the situation.

### Key message 3

Student safety is our top priority.

#### Supporting Points

1. The safest place for your child is inside the school.
2. For everyone's safety, please remain where you are.
3. School officials will provide more information soon.

## Student/Family Reunification

### Key message 1

A student/parent reunification process is underway due to [incident/event] at school [state briefly, if you can].

#### Supporting Points

1. This process protects the safety of students.
2. We plan and train for reunification.
3. Our plan ensures students are safely released.

Tweet or Text  
Family reunification  
underway at [location]. Bring  
your ID to check in. Your  
patience is appreciated.

### Key message 2

Be patient, the reunification process takes time.

#### Supporting Points

1. When you arrive, please check in and follow instructions.
2. It is common to feel anxious while you are waiting.
3. We will reunite students as quickly as possible.

### Key message 3

Bring a form of identification with you.

#### Supporting Points

1. You will be asked to show your ID and fill out a reunification card for each child.
2. Children can be released to your pre-designated emergency contact with ID.
3. Your patience is appreciated.

## Shelter

### Key message 1

Staff and students are sheltering at [name school] due to [event].

#### Supporting Points

1. Safety is our top priority.
2. The staff and students drill for [type of event].
3. We are following our shelter plan.

Tweet or Text

Sheltering protocol is in effect at [name school] due to [event – briefly]. We will notify you when shelter is over.

### Key message

Your child is sheltered and safe.

#### Supporting Points

1. We will remain sheltered until the danger passes.
2. Staff are with your children.
3. We are working to keep everyone safe.

### Key message

Please keep yourself safe.

#### Supporting Points

1. Stay current on official information.
2. Follow the advice of authorities.
3. You will receive another notification when shelter is over.



## Telling children about the event

### *Key Message #1:*

- 1) The age of the child should guide how much and the type of information you share about the event.**

#### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Give information at a level the child can understand.
- b) Give younger children fewer details about the disaster.
- c) Children of all ages need comfort and attention from the adults in their lives after events like this

### *Key Message #2:*

- 2) Be honest when talking to children.**

#### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Give children just enough information to answer their questions.
- b) Sometimes being honest means admitting you don't know the answer.
- c) Tell children there are people working to make them safe.

### *Key Message #3:*

- 3) Listen to the child's questions and answer them.**

#### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Let children know its ok to talk about how they feel.
- b) Some children may ask the same question over and over.
- c) Let children ask questions freely and give simple answers.

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### Reference:

*Psychosocial Issues for Children and Families in Disasters: A Guide for the Primary Care Physician. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Washington D.C., 1995.*

*Talking about Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages. National Disaster Education Coalition. July 2004.*

*Schlichtemeir-Nutzman, S. Help in the Aftermath: Post-disaster Resources. Nebraska Department of Public Institutions and Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 1995.*

## Children's reactions to a critical event

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### Key Message #1:

#### 1) **Adults and children have a variety of reactions.**

##### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Children may be scared, worried, distracted, have sleep problems, or feel sick.
- b) Children might act younger than their age.
- c) Everyone reacts in their own way.

### Key Message #2:

#### 2) **Some children may need additional support.**

##### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Children feel more secure with structure and routine.
- b) Keep in touch with your child's teacher or school counselor.
- c) Talk to your doctor if you're concerned about a child's reaction.

### Key Message #3:

#### 3) **There are several things you can do to help your children.**

##### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Make sure your children get plenty of sleep.
- b) Answer questions simply and honestly at an age-appropriate level.
- c) Information that is acceptable for adults may upset and confuse a child.

### **TWEET:**

(140 characters with spaces)

Kids have a variety of reactions after disasters. Some may need extra help - most will be fine with support from family & friends

140 - # characters in the User name + 4 (rt @) for the retweet...plus time stamp  
good for disasters

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### Reference:

*Recovery: After a Tornado. (n.d) National Child Traumatic Stress Network. 10 August 2006.*

[http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ\\_nd\\_torn\\_recovery&disasterType=torn&navPid=typ\\_nd\\_torn\\_desc](http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ_nd_torn_recovery&disasterType=torn&navPid=typ_nd_torn_desc).

*Speier, Anthony. Psychosocial Issues for Children and Adolescents in Disaster. 2nd ed. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Mental Health Services. Washington D.C., 2000*

*Vernberg, Eric M, et al. Prediction of Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Children after Hurricane Andrew. Journal of Abnormal Psychology. 105.2 (1996): 237-248.*

## **Exposing children to media about the event**

### *Key Message #1:*

#### **1) Talk with children about what they see and hear about the event.**

##### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) The age (and maturity) of the child should guide how much and the type of information you share about the event.
- b) Give younger children fewer details about the event.
- c) Listen to the child's questions and answer them.

### *Key Message #2:*

#### **2) Adults and children have a variety of reactions.**

##### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Children may be scared, worried, upset, have sleep problems, or feel sick.
- b) Younger children may believe an event is happening again if they see it repeated on TV.
- c) Children learn from adults how to react to the disaster.

### *Key Message #3:*

#### **3) Most children will be fine with support from family and friends.**

##### *Supporting Statements:*

- a) Children of all ages need comfort and attention from the adults in their lives after events like this.
- b) Limiting children's exposure to media may lessen everyone's stress.
- c) Talk to a professional if you're concerned about a child's reaction.

## **Children's questions about the perpetrators**

Note: This message is particularly pertinent after a human-caused incident with high public outrage. Consider being proactive in releasing this message.

### **Key Message #1:**

#### **1) It's always difficult to understand why people make these choices.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) This is a question that everyone is asking.
- b) We may never really know why.
- c) It is common to try to make sense out of a senseless act.

### **Key Message #2:**

#### **2) You will hear many opinions about why this happened.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Be skeptical about what you may hear.
- b) Much of what you hear will be opinions rather than facts.
- c) Limiting exposure to these opinions may lessen your stress.

### **Key Message #3:**

#### **3) We are working to find out more.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) We are working with other agencies involved in this situation.
- b) We are focusing on the facts.
- c) We want to use what we learn to prevent this in the future.

## **Anxiety & Stress after a critical event**

### **Key Message #1:**

#### **1) Take care of your emotional and spiritual needs.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) It's common to feel anxious or worried.
- b) Try to reduce your workload and regular responsibilities.
- c) Stay in contact with friends, family, and spiritual support.

### **Key Message #2:**

#### **2) Good physical health improves your outlook.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise.
- b) Avoid using drugs, alcohol, and tobacco to cope.
- c) Keep a regular schedule to lessen worry and anxiety.

TWEET:

Take care of emotional & spiritual needs. Good health improves your outlook. Prepare as you would for any emergency.

### **Key Message #3:**

***[For natural disaster or a public health emergency]***

#### **3) Prepare as you would for any emergency.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Make a list of healthy ways to take care of your mind and body.
- b) Stay informed about [insert event].
- c) Keep extra food, water, medicines, and household goods on hand.

***[For terrorism/shooting; can also be used for other events]***

#### **3) Take things one day at a time.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Focus on things you can control.
- b) Helping someone else can help you feel better.
- c) Do something you enjoy.

References:

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/mass-shooting.aspx>

## Rumors

### Key Message #1:

#### 1) Stay current on official information.

Supporting Statements:

- a. Be calm, and follow the advice of local authorities.
- b. Check the facts.
- c. Pay attention to official sources.

### Key Message #2:

#### 2) Professionals are working to resolve the situation.

Supporting Statements:

- a. Responders are trained to handle a variety of situations.
- b. They are taking actions according to plans.
- c. Responders are prepared for an event like this.

[Note: An alternate version of c), or an answer to a question, could be:]

- d. I have confidence in the people working on this situation.

TWEET:

Get the facts at:  
[website and/or  
facebook page]

TWEET:

Follow directions:  
[website and/or  
facebook page]

### Key Message #3:

#### 3) There are a number of things you can do.

Supporting Statements:

- a. Share the facts with people.
- b. Follow directions from local officials.
- c. Be ready to help when asked.

## **Understanding Media Coverage of the Event**

### **Key Message #1:**

#### **1) Be thoughtful about what you see and hear about the [event]**

Supporting Statements:

- a) It can take time to confirm facts.
- b) Avoid repeating rumors.
- c) Get the facts from official sources.

### **Key Message #2:**

#### **2) Information on social media could affect your reactions.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) A large number of sources exist on social media.
- b) Official sources must verify information before sharing it.
- c) Avoid reacting to rumors.

### **Key Message #3:**

#### **3) Most people will be fine with support from family and friends.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Limiting exposure to media may reduce everyone's stress.
- b) Trained professionals can help if you are overwhelmed.
- c) Rely on and support those around you.

## **Expect Strong Emotions After An Event**

### **Key Message #1:**

- 1) People may be surprised by intense and changing emotions.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Fear, anger, guilt, and sadness are common feelings after an event like this.
- b) You may also notice those emotions in others.
- c) Be patient with yourself and your loved ones.

### **Key Message #2:**

- 2) Take care of yourself during this stressful time.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Get plenty of rest.
- b) Take time for yourself.
- c) Talk to someone if you're feeling overwhelmed.

### **Key Message #3:**

- 3) We will get through this by supporting each other.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Focus on things you can control.
- b) Be available to help others when you can.
- c) Accept help when it is offered.

TWEET:

Fear, anger, guilt & sadness are common after an event. Take care of yourself. Talk to someone if you're overwhelmed.



## **Suicide Prevention**

Note: The topic of suicide prevention should be addressed openly to encourage people to get the help they need.

### **Key Message #1:**

#### **1) Many suicides can be prevented.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) The number one cause of suicide is untreated depression.
- b) Depression is treatable.
- c) Help is available.

### **Key Message #2:**

#### **2) Know the warning signs:**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide.
- b) Looking for ways to hurt or kill themselves.
- c) Feeling hopeless or helpless.

### **Key Message #3:**

#### **3) Know what to do and take action.**

Supporting Statements:

- a) Directly ask, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"
- b) Listen, offer hope, and get help.
- c) Call the suicide prevention hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

References:

<http://www.suicideprevention.nebraska.edu/>

## **Fact Sheets**

The following pages contain brief, one-page fact sheets that can be customized with your contact information and used as handouts or additional information for media in a press release.

Review the content and customize it for the critical event or disaster situation in your community. Add contact information or helpline numbers to the fact sheet as appropriate.

References are included to ensure your readers that the information is attained from valid sources. You may opt to delete the references if you require additional space for hotline numbers or local resources.

## Children's reactions

Children may display a variety of **emotional reactions after an event**. It is very normal to be distracted, frightened, insecure, or upset about what happened.

**How a parent reacts will make a difference** in the child's understanding and recovery after the disaster. Parents should observe, listen and answer questions about what is happening and explain in terms their child can understand.

Consider talking with the child's physician or a mental health professional if their emotional reactions concern you.

The following list includes some of the **normal reactions** children may have to the event:

Inability to concentrate	Crying/Depression
Withdrawal from others	Bedwetting
Not wanting to attend school	Thumb sucking
Headaches / Stomach aches	Nightmares
Changes in eating and sleeping habits	Clinging/fear of being left alone
Excessive fear of darkness	Arguing
Increase in physical complaints	

These are a few things parents or caregivers **can do to help children**:

- Hug your child often.
  - Reassure your child frequently that you are safe and together.
  - Talk with your child about his/her feelings. Let them know it is OK to feel the way they do.
  - Talk about what happened. Provide information the child can understand.
  - Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep. Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
  - Help children feel more secure by providing structure and routine.
  - Maintain normal daily tasks and activities.
  - Allow children to grieve about their lost treasures: a toy, a blanket, or a lost home.
  - Encourage children to keep in touch with friends and family.
  - Spend extra time together to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.
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Adapted from: <http://www.mentalhealth.org/dtac/ChildrensReactions.asp> 2004.

## How to talk to children after a critical event

### Note to Parents:

- Remember that you and your child are having normal or common reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Make sure you take care of your own physical and psychological needs so that you can attend to your child's needs.

*A common misconception is that children will be frightened if you talk to them about what is going on. Children are usually more frightened if you whisper about it and avoid talking to them.*

### How to start talking

- Give your children direct, undivided attention and let them know you want to listen and help them.
- Let your children ask questions freely and give them simple concrete answers at an age-appropriate level.

### How to listen and show you understand:

- Listen carefully to what they say, don't jump to conclusions, and repeat back to them what you heard them say
- Accept a child's perceptions. Avoid simply telling them to stop feeling the way they are. Talk about what makes them feel the way they do and what you can do to help.
- Take a break once in a while from talk and activities related to the disaster.

Adapted from the Listen, Protect, Connect website. You can find additional information for parents at: [http://www.ready.gov/kids/\\_downloads/PFA\\_Parents.pdf](http://www.ready.gov/kids/_downloads/PFA_Parents.pdf)

*Psychosocial Issues for Children and Families in Disasters: A Guide for the Primary Care Physician. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Washington D.C., 1995.*

*Talking about Disaster: Guide for Standard Messages. National Disaster Education Coalition. July 2004.*

*Schlichtemeir-Nutzman, Sue. Help in the Aftermath: Post-disaster Resources. Nebraska Department of Public Institutions and Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 1995.*

## Talking to Children about Death

Here are some simple guidelines that may help families talk to children about the death of a person or pet known or loved by the child.

- Tell the truth as gently as you can.  
*Example*, “Grandpa died. He’s not coming back, but we will always remember him.”  
DON’T: Confuse your child with vague phrases such as “passed away” or “no longer with us.”
- Share your grief.  
*Example*, “I’m very sad. How are you feeling about this?”  
DON’T: Hide your grief and send the message to your child that they should do the same.
- Comfort your child.  
*Example*, “Death is a part of life.” Ease your child’s fears of the unknown. Talk about your spiritual beliefs.
- Deal with your child’s emotions.  
*Example*, “Let’s talk about what you are feeling.”  
DON’T: Tell your child to stop feeling something without explanation.
- Encourage your child to attend memorial services or commemorate the loved one that they lost.  
*Example*: “Would you like to go to the funeral/memorial service?”  
DON’T: Force your child to go.